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TAGS: SENV EAGR EAID KTIA PREL UZ

SUBJECT: ARAL SEA TO BE FOCUS OF MARCH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE IN TASHKENT

REF: TASHKENT 146

Classified By: Poloff Steven Prohaska for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 7, the Ambassador, USAID Country Director, and Poloff met with Fikrit Akcura of the United Nations Development Program and others who are directly involved with an upcoming international conference on the Aral Sea on March 11-13. Akcura described how Uzbekistan has gradually warmed to the idea of a regional approach to water issues. Two key steps the donor community can take to improve the quality of the discussions on water usage would be to create viable international platforms to address these issues and increase education on international water law so Central Asian government officials are more aware of the broader context. The organizers of this conference are hoping to increase international awareness of the growing problems associated with the Aral Sea, and implicitly want active participation from United States experts. End summary.

Shifting Policy on a Regional Approach to Water

¶2. (C) On February 7, the Ambassador, USAID Country Director, and Poloff met with Fikrit Akcura of the United Nations Development Program and others who are directly involved with an upcoming international conference on the Aral Sea in Tashkent on March 11-13. Akcura discussed Uzbekistan's evolving position on a regional approach to water issues. He recounted how Uzbekistan had preferred to address water strictly as a bilateral issue when he first arrived about seven years ago. When the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation program was being formed, water was supposed to be up for discussion at the first meeting. The Uzbek delegation, however, had forced water off the agenda with backing from China in 2003. The United Nations Development Program also tried to pursue a regional water strategy, but

to no avail, and eventually terminated such efforts.

¶3. (C) Much to Akcura's surprise, the Secretary-General of the Eurasian Economic Community (of which Uzbekistan is a member) contacted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in October and requested assistance in forming a regional water strategy for Central Asia. The Government of Uzbekistan subsequently confirmed its interest in pursuing this regional approach.

Objectives of and Expectations for the Conference

¶4. (C) Uktam Abdurakhmonov, the Executive Director of the Charity Fund for Aral Gene Pool Protection, confirmed that he has been working on an agenda for the conference next month with the Aral Sea and regional water issues as key topics, dispelling rumors that Uzbekistan had discussion of these removed. The government, Abdurakhmonov said, wants to use this conference to intensify discussions on international coordination, and perhaps to persuade others to sign up to a declaration or convention on a water regime in Central Asia. The conference will address a variety of topics including the environmental impact of water projects and the implications for economics, security, and social stability. (Comment: They seemed to be looking for donor funding and commitment as well. End comment.)

¶5. (C) The international community has become less interested in Central Asia's Aral Sea problems despite the fact that these are getting worse, Abdurakhmonov continued. The main goal of the conference is to attract the attention of the international community and to show that the states of Central Asia cannot solve these problems on their own.

What the Donor Community Can Do

¶6. (C) Akcura noted two major hurdles to discussions of water usage. First, there are no viable regional institutions to serve as platforms for these discussions, and the institutions that had been set up during the 1990s for this purpose had been "unrealistic." Second, there are virtually no Central Asian government officials who have studied international water law. While there are a number of technical experts on water, they are not aware of the broader context. The donor community should put effort into graduating a cadre of people who can better serve these discussions and help to fix the current dysfunctional situation, he said. The United Nations Development Program also has a \$1.2 million pilot project in Zarafshan, Akcura noted, to show that water issues affect not just farmers, but also municipalities, cities, and industries. The project is also aimed at showing how to avoid wasteful water usage. He hoped that this could be expanded to other cities.

¶7. (C) Akcura appeared cautiously optimistic that this could be a good beginning to a regional approach to water issues if the Eurasian Economic Community and Uzbekistan stay involved. He also hoped that the European Union would take part in the conference, and noted that South Korea, Japan, and Germany may be leading efforts to engage with Uzbekistan on the bilateral front.

Karimov's Opinion on Water

¶8. (C) Akcura also said that when he had presented his credentials to President Karimov, the issue of transboundary water had come up during their two-hour discussion. Karimov had reminisced about his boyhood, saying that areas surrounding the aluminum plants (on the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border) had been much cleaner than they are today. Karimov complained about hydropower projects, saying that having hydropower fuel smelters adversely affects Uzbekistan. Water is a vital issue for Uzbekistan, Karimov had argued, and is especially important in the summer for agriculture.

Comment:

19. (C) It is encouraging that Uzbekistan is willing to host a dialogue on the Aral Sea and regional water issues at this upcoming conference. Reading between the lines of those involved in putting this event together, it appears that they are hoping for expert participation from the United States. Clearly this would help to further their goal of raising international awareness of the health and economic problems associated with the Aral Sea. Indeed, in a later conversation with Poloff, Adburakhmonov reiterated his request for suggestions from the United States on possible speakers at this conference. Participation from U.S. Government officials and academics could be useful, particularly if lessons learned from transboundary water issues involving the United States and Canada can be successfully applied to Central Asia. Our role should be to provide informal commentary, not to serve as a catalyst for action just yet--the issue is not ripe for resolution. Failure to resolve these problems to the satisfaction of all parties involved will probably lead to serious tension between Central Asian countries down the road. Formulating a regional strategy for water usage that the Central Asian states are willing to agree to is likely to be a long-term issue given its acute sensitivity.

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